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ABSTRACT

This report presents information on funds available for foreign graduate students wishing to attend graduate school in the United States. An opening paragraph notes that the information was gathered by administrators who work with the evaluation and training of international graduate students to prepare them for graduate teaching assistantships. The first section details the types of graduate assistantships generally available: (1) graduate research assistants (GRA); (2) graduate laboratory assistants (GLA); and (3) graduate teaching assistants (GTA) and international teaching assistants (ITA). This section describes what is generally expected in each category, noting, for instance, that the word "laboratory" can have multiple meanings and that teaching may include diverse duties. The following section discusses funds in the form of tuition reductions or waivers and stipends. The next section looks at English-proficiency testing for international students and the institutional context for university requirements. This section also lists states and state institutional systems where testing is required. Also covered are types of tests, training of international students, timing of training, and the cost of testing and training. A final section explains how GRA funding is controlled and describes some problems students may encounter. Appended is a checklist for potential graduate students. (JB)

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Funding to Attend Graduate School in the United States: *An Update*

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The information in this report was first presented at the OSEAS European Conference at La Grande Motte, France, on December 3, 1991. The report is based not my own experience in U.S. higher education but upon the information I have received from colleagues who work with the evaluation and training of international graduate students to prepare them for graduate teaching assistantship (personal communication, J.C. Constantinides and R. Smith).

Types of Graduate Assistantships

Generally, graduate education in the U.S. is financed through various types of assistantships rather than through full grants. That is, international students need to understand that funding will usually require significant amounts of work. Across the U.S., the following terms are used to designate basic types of graduate assistantships:

1. Graduate Research Assistant (GRAs)
2. Graduate Laboratory Assistants (GLAs)
3. Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) or ITAs (International Teaching Assistants)

In most instances, a GRA works for a faculty member to carry out that person's research projects. While such "research" might involve data collection or laboratory work, it might also be purely clerical, requiring typing and filing skills. GRAs can also be expected to do library-based research for faculty members, including the clerical tasks of picking up materials and returning them to the library. The work tasks are designed by the individual faculty member to fit her/his needs.

The word *laboratory* has multiple meanings in a U.S. university. A GLA might be working in the chemistry lab, but s/he might also be working in the language laboratory. The work might involve providing technical support for the lab's activities, but in some instances the GLA is actually a teacher, providing instructions for students in the lab section of a lecture class.

The "teaching" done by a GTA can run from team-teaching with other lab assistants in a physics lab to lecturing in management class. There are no institutional much less national standards for what tasks are assigned under this category; use of the term can change from department to department within the same university. The usual term now for international graduate teaching assistants is ITA although the term FTA (foreign teaching

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assistant) is also used.

In some institutions, the most highly sought position is that of Graduate Teaching Assistant with these students receiving higher pay. That situation can be reversed at other institutions, especially scientific or technical institutions that emphasize research over teaching.

While the standard is often unspoken, the graduate student's work week will more than likely be based on the U.S. tradition of the 40-hour work week so that assistantships are thought of in terms of 10-hour blocks. For example, a research assistantship might require 10 hours of work each week while a teaching assistantship might require approximately 20 hours each week. Such time estimations are in many cases wildly unrealistic. Just as productive faculty members seldom work only 40 hours each week so, too, graduate students can expect to see their work week expand to many additional hours to accommodate work, study, and life. GTAs are expected to do whatever is necessary to be good teachers; GRAs are expected to do whatever is necessary to complete the tasks that they are assigned. Graduate students and faculty understand that this apprenticeship system is supposed to mean that the faculty member will take some interest in the student's further academic career, providing advice, writing letters of recommendation, pointing out job opportunities, and so forth. Thus, the assistantships provide not just funding for graduate study but also academic contacts that can be important in the student's academic success.

Funds Involved

Graduate assistantships can involve at least two basic types of funding:

1. Tuition reductions/waivers
2. Stipends

Assistantships can involve (1) tuition reductions/waivers with no stipend, (2) stipends with no reduction/waiver of tuition, or (3) stipends along with reduction or waiving of tuition.

A reduction in tuition might provide tuition at out-of-state rates to those charged residents of the state. Or some portion of the tuition might be waived. Stipends are different from institution to institution and from academic department to academic department, depending on the funding resources of the institution or of the individual department. Students must not assume that the funding provided at one institution is comparable to that at another even though the same terminology is being used.

English-proficiency Testing for International GTAs

Fewer U.S. students are getting advanced degrees in science, technology, and business administration; thus, institutions are seeking international students for graduate programs in these areas. Some institutions are beginning to require teaching experience for all doctoral students--students cannot get the degree if they do not teach. There is better funding for assistants in science, technology, and business administration than in the social sciences, the humanities, and education. Because U.S. universities are dependent on GTAs

to provide introductory classes in these areas, including required introductory courses in chemistry, mathematics and statistics, a large research institution is likely to have significant numbers of international students teaching its undergraduates. Many of these international students have limited ability to communicate in English beyond the confines of their particular academic specialties; few of the U.S. undergraduates are skilled at communication with non-native speakers of English. The potential of this combination for cultural and academic misunderstanding has been richly realized in the complaints of students, parents, and state legislators about the "foreign teaching assistantship problem." The concern on the part of students and parents has led to institutional and legal actions around the U.S.

Before a non-native speaker can be assigned to teach U.S. undergraduates, s/he is very likely going to be required to pass an English proficiency test and to participate in a training program. Such testing is now required by state law or by institutional regulation in the following states:

I. State Law

Florida
Missouri
Pennsylvania
South Carolina
Texas (Faculty included in addition to graduate students)

II. Institutional or University System Regulation

Arizona
Georgia
Iowa
Michigan
Wyoming

While these laws or regulations apply only to the state-funded institutions in that state, many private universities also have required testing and/or training.

Types of testing

Many institutions use the Test of Spoken English (TSE) or its institutional version the SPEAK. Specific information on these two tests is available through the Educational Testing Service. Many other institutions use either highly modified versions of the SPEAK or entirely different tests, including teaching simulations and/or oral interviews. These oral interviews can be much more interactive than the familiar FSI, requiring role plays and teaching demonstrations.

Types of training

Generally, training programs for international GTAs will have the following three components:

1. U.S. culture (academic and institutional rather than general)
2. Teaching skills (how to communicate with undergraduates at this institution)
3. Language skills
    a. Improved speaking ability
    b. Use of English in teaching

The training can be required for all GTAs (U.S. and international), for international GTAs only, or for those international graduate students who did not pass the English proficiency test.

Timing of training

Students who are required to participate in a training program can expect great variety in the timing and the length of the training, which can run from four hours to four weeks to an entire semester (for courses that are taught along with the student's other graduate courses). Training courses can occur before the beginning of the fall term, and thus prior to the beginning of the student's teaching assignment. Other training programs occur during the term (but before any teaching assignment) so that the student has some type of research or laboratory assistantship initially. Yet other training is given during the academic term at the same time that the ITA is already dealing with a teaching situation.

Some training programs are structured as non-degree courses that carry credit that counts toward the student's fulltime load but does not count toward the graduate degree. Other training is non-credit.

Cost for Testing and Training

Generally, the academic institution will pay for the cost of testing--although this is not always done. Training costs are handled in at least these three ways:

1. Institution pays all (testing and training)
2. Institution pays for part (testing, training, but not ESL training for students with substantial difficulty)
3. Institution pays only for testing; student pays for training
4. Institution pays for nothing; student pays for everything

Upon arrival at the institution and participation in a testing program, some ITAs are found to have significant difficulties communicating in English. The student's dysfunctional English creates a very difficult situation for an institution and for the international graduate student if the student's funding is dependent on the award of a teaching assistantship. Most

institution will assign the student to some non-teaching duties for a specified length of time, often one academic year. At the end of that time, the student must either pass the English-proficiency test or his/her award will be canceled. A very few institutions will cancel the award at the beginning of a student's program upon arrival in the U.S. if the student does not pass the English-proficiency test. Funding to pay for needed ESL training is often the responsibility of the individual graduate student. In addition to the cost of such ESL training, such students will generally need to be in the U.S. longer than they had planned in order to complete their graduate degrees.

Control of GRA Funding

Awards, especially GRAs and GLAs but also GTAs, are controlled at the departmental and even the professorial level. In contrast to undergraduate education, where admission and financial awards are controlled at the institutional level, U.S. graduate education is quite tightly controlled at the departmental and the college level. Potential graduate students should consider doing research into their discipline to find faculty members and departments that especially fit their own academic interests and preparation. For example, students can get information about the academic home of faculty members who publish in the major journals in their field. They can correspond with the faculty members, asking questions about their research and about the department's graduate programs. Students should realize that there are quite good research universities in every state in the U.S. and often two or three in each state with strong departments in particular fields of study. The best sign that a particular department has a strong faculty will be the publication by members of that faculty in various journals and the participation of members of that faculty in sponsored international research projects. Savvy students will also get to know the U.S. faculty who are visiting in their cities, for example, Fulbright scholars or AID program participants or advisers. Finally, the aware potential graduate student understands that all academic fields are not uniformly well funded. Students in the sciences, mathematics, business, and music will find funding much more easily than will students in the humanities, the social sciences, or education.

The situation is not much changed from when I myself sought funding to pursue my Ph.D. I was admitted to two universities, both of which had excellent English Departments, and offered graduate teaching assistantships by both of them. Neither assistantship carried a tuition waiver or reduction. One was a private university with such high tuition that the assistantship did not cover the full amount, so I would have had to pay additional money for tuition and find money for living expenses. The other was a state university with much lower tuition; the assistantship covered the tuition and provided enough for me to live on if I was careful about my money. Thus, my choice was clear. What I did not know was that the assistantship was paid through the state's personnel rules which meant that I could not be on the payroll until I had actually presented myself to the university's personnel office and signed up; more importantly, I signed up too late to be paid for the first two months at the institution--I arrived in late August, started teaching in early September, and did not receive any pay until the end of October. I still have vivid memories of my panic until I discovered the short-term loan program that provided a low interest loan for tuition and living expenses

until my assistantship actually began. Thus, I have added to the checklist below a question about the beginning date for receiving the funding.

In order to put some of this information into a format that can be used by overseas advisers and potential graduates, the following checklist was developed to guide students in seeking funding and evaluating funding offers. The old saying is "not to look a gift horse in the mouth," but the Trojans would have been better off if they had studied that horse more thoroughly. Students must examine all offers of assistantships very carefully because of the great variety in meanings possible behind the terms used to describe such funding.

Finally, I hope that the information in this report will be of use to advisers and to potential graduate students. Being a graduate student in a new country is stressful enough without having unpleasant surprises about the nature and limits of the funding provided to support that study.

Checklist for Potential Graduate Students

I. Finding funding

A. Be aware of the professional literature

B. Communicate directly with professors who are doing work similar to or of interest to the potential graduate student

C. Be aware of professors who are working in their institutions/cities/countries (Fulbright, AID, etc.)

D. Be realistic about potential funding for certain professions

1. Top of the list: Physics, chemistry, biology
2. Music
3. Bottom of the list: Education, Humanities,

E. Be aware of the importance of language skills, especially speaking, even for theoretical physicists

F. Develop good typing skills and knowledge of some word processing system (because of similarities between systems changing from one to another is usually not difficult)

II. Evaluation of offers of assistantships

A. Exact terms of the offer

1. Tuition reduction/waiver: Is there a reduction in tuition? How much? How much remains to be paid?

2. Stipend: Is there a stipend? How well does it cover the cost of living in that particular location? Do I get the entire stipend amount or are some deductions taken out (social security or income tax, for example)? When is the stipend paid? [A student might compare the stipend to the cost of living figure used in the preparation of the I-20, but these figures are not always realistic.] Can I have the names and mailing addresses of other graduate students from my country who have similar assistantships so that I can get information from them about the costs of living in your city?

B. Exact nature of the work to be done

1. Duties: What will my exact responsibilities be? Can I have a job description? Who do I report to? How will I be evaluated?
2. Number of hours each week: Generally, how many hours each week will this assistantship require?
3. Limits on the number of graduate courses that can be taken at the same time: How many graduate classes can I take with this assistantship?

C. Exact nature of the English-proficiency testing program for teaching assistantships

1. Test format: What will I have to do? How long will it take?
2. Test timing: When do I take the test?
3. Test results: How do I get the results? What do the scores mean?
4. Test costs: Who pays for the test? How much does it cost if I have to pay?

D. Exact nature of the training program

1. Training format: What will I have to do? What am I expected to learn?
2. Training timing: When does the training take place?
3. Training results: What happens at the end of the training?
4. Training costs: Who pays for the training? How much does it cost if I have to pay?